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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL: OPPOSITION ARMING, MARCH 14 TO  
ELECT A PRESIDENT "AT ANY PRICE"

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) On August 31, former President Amine Gemayel told the Ambassador that Hizballah and Michel Aoun are arming their followers, constituting a growing military and security threat. He believes the opposition is intimidating March 14, and Hizballah-Aoun forces will act before the country can hold a presidential election. There is no longer any separation between Hizballah and its Iranian backers, Gemayel argued. To elect a consensus president would give Iran and Syria control over Lebanon, so March 14 is prepared to elect its presidential candidate by a simple majority "at any price." The group has chosen alternate meeting sites in case Berri will not convene parliament, but is still working to secure the simple majority of MPs it needs to hold an election. Finally, Gemayel asked that the United States support March 14 by recognizing the president it selects and convincing LAF Commander Michel Sleiman to abandon any thought of heading an interim government, by noting that we will not recognize its legitimacy. End summary.

AOUN, HIZBALLAH ARMING  
FOR A CONFRONTATION

2. (C) During an August 31 meeting, former President Amine Gemayel and his son Sami told the Ambassador and Econoff that they had ample rumors but no hard evidence that Free Patriotic Movement leader (FPM) Michel Aoun is arming his followers, constituting a growing military and security threat rather than just political cover for Hizballah. Gemayel believes Aoun has distributed approximately 400 machine guns in the villages around Baabda and Byblos, probably paid for by Hizballah. A militia is not easy to maintain, Gemayel explained, and Aoun does not have the requisite funding or organization to do so; he couldn't even control Christian areas during the Metn election. This points to Hizballah backing of Aoun's current efforts. Hizballah is also arming its own followers to help Aoun. The group cannot interfere directly in Christian mountain strongholds but is preparing to intervene along the coast, arming, training, and sending additional fighters to three Shia villages near Byblos.

3. (C) The opposition is taking action to intimidate March 14, Gemayel argued, intentionally leaking news of Hizballah arming the FPM and Shia fighters. The August 19 shooting by

FPM members of a Kata'eb sympathizer in Kahaleh is another example of intimidation. Demonstrators are returning to the downtown tent city, and Hizballah is improving the infrastructure of its strongholds in the southern suburbs, the Biga', and the south. (Note: Gemayel showed us a map of alleged Hizballah reinforcements in the southern village of Jezzine. End note.) Finally, Gemayel alleged that someone is pressuring Saad Hariri to accept General Michel Sleiman as an interim president.

¶4. (C) Gemayel predicted that Hizballah will act before March 14 uses their simple majority to elect a president. The group will not force a formal coup, but will allow small street confrontations to slowly escalate. That way, it will look confusing to the international community; no one will be able to accuse Hizballah and Aoun as being the only ones to use arms, even though their greater strength will allow them to prevail. Gemayel repeatedly worried that Hizballah will invade downtown Beirut, the Central Bank, the Serail, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Finance. He also worried that Hizballah could seal off Shia areas of the country and focus fighting in Christian areas, even disguising its Shia fighters as Aounists, by having the Shia wear orange shirts.

NO LONGER ANY SEPARATION  
BETWEEN HIZBALLAH AND IRGC  
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¶5. (C) There is no longer any separation between Hizballah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Gemayel argued, with Hizballah fighters trained in IRGC academies. Hizballah does not have "red lines;" it has not fomented a Sunni-Shia clash so far simply because the time is not yet right. The presidential election is just an excuse,

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Gemayel told us, a coincidence of the constitutional calendar, for the current escalation. Hizballah and its Syrian-Iranian backers' real goals include provoking conflict between Christian groups, creating a vacuum that allows Syria and Iran to reassert control, and confronting the West in Lebanon. Syria and Iran want to be able to claim to have defeated the West in Lebanon. Gemayel worries that after Syria and Iran demonstrate a victory over Western influence in the region, they will reshape Lebanon's institutions.

¶6. (C) Hizballah and its backers are successfully using Lebanese citizens' fear of a presidential vacuum to reassert control. Maronite Patriarch Sfeir is so afraid of a power vacuum that he is proposing unacceptable "nobody" candidates, Gemayel lamented, while Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Sleiman believes that a vacuum is his path to an interim presidency.

¶7. (C) What Sleiman and others don't understand is that the constitution entrusts power to the existing prime minister and his cabinet, rather than to the president, if a new president is not elected. In an interim presidency the parliament is an electoral rather than a legislative body; it can pass no law until it elects a president. The constitution requires that the cabinet not resign until after the formation of a new government, precisely to avoid any vacuum, Gemayel told us. Perhaps Sleiman would be less likely to head an interim government if they realized it would be unconstitutional and unrecognized, he argued.

MARCH 14 WILL ELECT THEIR  
PRESIDENT "AT ANY PRICE"  
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¶8. (C) March 14 must elect its presidential candidate "at any price," Gemayel argued, and will not hesitate to elect its candidate with a simple majority. Because of the implied veto of Hizballah, a consensus president would allow Syria and Iran to reassert control over and reshape Lebanese

institutions; a compromise cabinet, new electoral law, and a compromise parliament would quickly follow. That course would consolidate Hizballah's "state within a state" and endanger all that various UN Security Council resolutions have achieved, including establishment of the Special Tribunal. At some stage March 14, too, will have to use "all available means," Gemayel quietly threatened. "We need a Plan B," he argued, intimating that March 14 forces are preparing their own non-political measures.

¶9. (C) March 14 has chosen alternate meeting sites in case Berri refuses to convene parliament in late September, but is still trying to rally the simple majority of MPs it needs to hold an election. Gemayel is waiting for Saad Hariri to return before hosting a coalition meeting to discuss the presidency, and the group is working on a media campaign. Gemayel expects that influential Lebanese and foreign allies will convince fence sitters such as Mohammad Safadi, Boutros Harb, and Bahij Tabbarah to vote with March 14. Harb, who recently said he would withdraw his candidacy if he could not obtain the support of two-thirds of the parliament, can no longer be considered a candidate, Gemayel reasoned.

LOOKING TO U.S. ASSISTANCE  
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¶10. (C) The United States can help by promising international support to the candidate March will elect with a simple majority, Gemayel continued, by helping the group remain unified. In addition, the US has the most potential influence over and can "seduce" Sleiman to relinquish his hope of an interim presidency with an offer of greater support for him in a later political role. Sleiman is uncomfortable with the Syrians who put him in place, Gemayel argued, and would prefer a western sponsor.

COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) Unlike in previous meetings, Gemayel did not hint that he should be considered the savior president (although much of his message sounded "presidential" in tone). In fact, he offered a more cogent, strategic view of what is happening than what he usually gives us. While he had no specific examples, the allegations of Aounists arming themselves for offensive action correspond with many other rumors we have heard. Gemayel did not seem to be trying to

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settle scores with a hated rival (whose candidate beat him in the recent Metn by-elections) but instead appeared truly concerned about Aoun joining with Hizballah in violent street action designed to prevent parliamentary elections.

FELTMAN